

Newspaper: Providence Journal

Date: October 1, 2008

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Cut in benefits thins ranks of state workers

From today forward, workers leaving state government will have to pay more for their retiree health coverage.

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PROVIDENCE — There were empty chairs across state government as the deadline arrived yesterday for state workers to get out before the price went up on the cost of health insurance for retirees.

Whole offices emptied out, including the state's entire Equal Opportunity Office. The administrator, Vincent Igliozzi, and the three women who worked with him all put in their last day on Friday.

The state's acting Medicaid director, Frank Spinelli, gave two weeks notice. Then he, too, left, with a first-of-its-kind Medicaid waiver request aimed at saving the state \$67 million this year still pending under the watchful and concerned eyes of lawmakers and advocates from here to Washington.

Retire

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Close on his heels were the chief financial officer and the budget chief of the state welfare agency.

Big picture: there were at least 1,139 fewer employees on the state payroll in mid-September than there were on July 1, 2007, according to Republican Governor Carcieri's office. Scores more retirements were expected between that Sept. 13 payroll date, Monday's deadline for the departing workers to file their paperwork, and yesterday's deadline to leave.

The paperwork is still trickling into the state retirement and budget offices, and state officials say it may be two weeks or more before they know how many long-time employees bolted to avoid having to pay 20 percent of the premiums for health insurance that state retirees have, until today, gotten for free or at a much reduced cost.

In the health and human services arena alone, at least 285 state workers — out of 3,800 — have re-

tired since July 1, according to Adelita Orefice, chief of the office that oversees the Departments of Health; Human Services; Mental Health, Retardation and Hospitals; Elderly Affairs and Children, Youth & Families.

Representing close to 7.5 percent of the work force in those five agencies, the recent flood of retirees includes 144 staffers at MHRH, 69 at DHS, 36 at DCYF, 23 at the Health Department, 9 at Elderly Affairs, and 4 in Orefice's own office.

Orefice is reluctant to say how many hospital attendants and nurses are now gone at the state hospital, but insists that with overtime callbacks and other interim-steps "we have direct patient care covered."

"You know, there is a sense," said Orefice, "that on Monday the whole world came to an end and state government is not functioning. State government is functioning ... in our case, with 285 fewer people ... [But] people are picking up the slack. You know somebody lost two secretaries and another person comes in and fills in and answers the phone."

"Honest to God, this is not un-

like December or August of any year when a lot of people are on vacation. You know, people are out ... sometimes it takes a little longer to answer the phone. But we recognize that this isn't a vacation schedule," she said. "It's going to go on a little longer."

"Can I do this long-term ... for three, four months? No," she said. "There is going to have to be some service cutbacks. The question is what and that's what we are working on deciding."

State hiring hasn't stopped.

State revenue director Gary Sasse was given permission in July to start filling 14 of 43 openings at the state's motor vehicle registries. In an interview yesterday, Sasse said he made a case for hiring eight direct-customer service representatives "which if we didn't fill would have affected branch hours," two driving examiners to perform road tests, and four back-office staffers.

The registry is the one state office that almost every Rhode Islander is assured of visiting. Long lines have been assailed in the past as an emblem of a government that was not working well.

Sasse said he made his winning

case to a steering committee that, at the time, included top Carcieri aide Beverly Najarian and state budget officer Rosemary Gallogly. He said directors were asked to identify "critical positions," and these were on his list.

Past governors forced by budget constraints to limit hiring relied on what former Governors Sundlun and Almond called an "Emergency Hiring Council."

The five-member council controlled all state hiring; no vacancy in state government could be filled without the council's permission, nor could a new position be created. Promotions and consulting contracts with former state employees also required the council's approval. Membership was made up of senior advisers and other staff. But then a case stemming from the hiring-council's 1997 attempt to bar handicapped-rights advocate Greg Solas from a meeting reached the Rhode Island Supreme Court, which ruled that the state's Open Meetings Law applies to all state boards, even if their powers were simply advisory.

The governor's office responded by disbanding the council.

"The problem we had was the composition [of the hiring council] was very close to the governor's senior staff, and we certainly weren't going to open up the governor's senior staff ... and cabinet level meetings. That would destroy the inner workings of government," Almond's then chief of staff, Joseph Larisa, explained. From then on, the council's job-screening functions were carried out "less formally" by many of the same people.

Carcieri has taken his cue from that model, leaving it to what his communication director, John Robitaille, describes as an "informal" group that includes Orefice, Department of Administrator Director Jerome Williams and one of his top deputies, and former Department of Administration director Najarian to sort through hiring requests.

In August, Robitaille said about 75 top staffers and administrators underwent an intense, one-day training session on how to use the "Six Sigma" techniques that corporations such as Motorola have used to identify priorities, and having done so, decide which of the newly vacant jobs are critical,

while dispensing with others and streamlining operations. He said the group then split into subgroups that have been working with Michelle Johnson, executive director of Textron Six Sigma and deans from Johnson & Wales University and Providence College.

While agency directors are asked every year around this time to come up with money-saving budget proposals, Johnson said the techniques they are being taught now are aimed at getting them to "quantify" what in the past might have just been "opinions" about whether they could or could not continue to deliver services to target populations in a tight budget year, after a deluge of retirements.

The teams are expected to report their conclusions to the governor in about two weeks.

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